A MIGRATION OF LEPIDOPTERA IN SOUTH DEVON, AUTUMN 1990

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AT FIRST, our journey to Branscombe in South Devon on Saturday 29th September did not seem propitious. Traffic on the A303 was heavy as were the showers which came on with increasing frequency the further west we travelled. When at long last we arrived at our destination the showers had coalesced into a continuous downpour — much to the delight of the local populace who were welcoming the first rain in four months. We grockles viewed the lowering skies and sodden vegetation with less enthusiasm and had fleeting thoughts of a rapid return to the desert conditions of Surrey next day.

To celebrate our arrival the rain eased long enough for us to get installed in our accommodation without getting drowned. An hour later, fortified with a pot of tea, the recommencing rain did not seem so bad and, anyway, it was remarkably warm for the time of year. So, after donning shorts and track shoes, enough driftwood was collected to build a platform on the nearby cliff face, on which a light trap was installed. Towards midnight a myopic glance at the trap showed something which, from a distance, looked like an out of focus stone or caddis fly. Closer inspection produced an *Utetheisa pulchella* (L.), never before seen but instantly recognised — and there was this hapless author, minus spectacles and with all the gear in the car parked some fifty yards away. The necessary trip to and from the vehicle, including a detour to collect the keys, was covered in record time and a beautiful Speckled Footman was secured. Even one's wife was impressed enough to remark that it was nice to see something, stated to be a bit special, which looked a little different. Next morning the trap contained, apart from the usual local residents, a couple of dozen each of *Agrotis ipsilon* (Hufn.) and *Autographa gamma* (L.), and five *Udea ferrugalis* (Hübn.). Whilst clearing up, a second *U. pulchella* was found on a nearby wall and a third, which was flushed up, flew off into the wild blue yonder.

Sunday the 30th continued very warm with showers which increased towards dusk. At Beer, *Pieris brassicae* (L.) was seen to be regularly coming in from the sea — say one every five minutes or so — and then heading in a generally easterly direction overland. This presumed migration was conspicuous for the whole of our stay in the area and was noted over a front which extended from Sidmouth in the west to Lyme Regis in the east, whenever flying conditions seemed good and even when they did not, such as at dusk and even in quite heavy rain. Several *Vanessa atalanta* (L.) and a *Cynthia cardui* (L.) were also noted flying to the east but these were not seen to come in from the sea.

That night back at Branscombe was very warm and muggy. Much time was spent hovering around the light with the obvious in mind but to no avail. An early arrival was *Agrius convolvuli* (L.) together with a vast number of *A. ipsilon, A. segetum* (D. & S.), *Peridroma saucia* (Hübn.) and *A. gamma,* about twenty *U. ferrugalis* and ten *Nomophila noctuella* (D. & S.). Next morning the trap held a single *Rhodometria sacraria* (L.) and a second *A. convolvuli* with a third being found later at the lights of the nearby public toilets. When the trap was cleared a very small moth was buzzing around in the empty case and proved impossible to box until it settled in a very characteristic posture with its wings, like a pitched roof, over its abdomen. Completely unknown to me, it was boxed with bated breath and — much later — was identified as the Pyralid *Hellula undalis* (Fabr.) This insect was first recorded from East Prawle, some forty-five miles to the south-west, in 1967 and has been subsequently noted in very small numbers from other spots along the south coast. The weather continued very much as yesterday and a non-entomological visit to Budleigh Salterton produced large numbers of *P. brassicae* and about as many *P. rapae* (L.). These were seen everywhere and especially about the municipal flower beds. Many were noted on the wing but no particular movement pattern was obvious.

Back at Branscombe in the afternoon the dog, whilst chasing a rabbit, flushed an *U. pulchella* from bracken. This flew quite slowly and steadily in a straight line for some one hundred meters before settling on the vegetation once more. Was this the specimen which got away a couple of days earlier? Heavy rain at dusk was not promising and things were very quiet at first before giving the best night so far. The common species previously seen were present in ever greater numbers and four forms of *A. gamma* were obvious. A large brightly marked form, one slightly smaller and less clearly marked, two specimens of the melanic form and about ten *A. gamma gamina* (Stgdr.). *N. noctuella* was also present in two forms, one with dark markings on a lighter ground and the other more unicolorous. Three *R. sacraria* with very red cross lines were seen with new species *Mythimna vitellina* (Hübn.) and two *Heliothis armigera* (Hübn.).

And that was the end of play . . . almost.

Tuesday 2nd October gave longer brighter periods with a sharp drop in temperature and the wind round to the east. The night was at first clear with a superb full moon and rain later. The light produced fourteen *A. ipsilon,* singletons of *A. gamma* and *P. saucia* with a second *H. undalis,* which made the landing back to earth more gentle. The rest of the week gave an even brighter moon, stronger easterly winds and four moths at two lights on the Thursday. Still, it was a memorable holiday which we plan to repeat in 1991 in the hope that our visit will once again coincide with a mass exodus from the Continent.

Reference

Goater, P.J.B. (1986) *British Pyralid moths.*